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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3902

The Honorable James R. Langevin
Opening Statement – “Federal Efforts to Mitigate
Vulnerabilities in the Food Supply Chain”
July 24, 2007

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Good morning. I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here today. This hearing was originally scheduled for last Thursday, but we had to postpone the hearing due to the 9/11 conference, so I appreciate the witnesses' flexibility and patience and I thank you all for coming back to be here today.

Recent months have brought increased attention to vulnerabilities in the United States' food supply chain. Today's hearing will present us with both the public and private sector perspectives on how to best secure our food distribution networks. In the last year, we have witnessed food-borne illness outbreaks associated with spinach, lettuce and peanut butter, among others. This spring, incidents including the melamine contamination of vegetable proteins used in pet foods, the diethylene glycol contamination of toothpaste, and drug residues in fish demonstrated how intentional food adulteration can pose a far greater challenge than unintentional contamination.

Many of these incidents were traced back to problems associated with the Chinese food supply. It is evident that China's food and drug safety standards are often weak, poorly enforced or both, though I am encouraged by recent indications that China's Food and Drug Administration will be making their processes more transparent in order to ensure more stringent safety measures. Unfortunately, China isn't the only problem country. Developing nations in Africa and parts of Latin America also have significant food safety issues, and it would be short-sighted to place the blame on one country or in one region. This is a global problem, and has the potential to cripple the food supply throughout the United States.

We are here today to figure out how – in working with both private sector and public sector partners – we can mitigate vulnerabilities and secure our food supply chain here at home. Just as the nation's food sector is comprised of a variety of distinct businesses and operations, so too is the Federal government's effort in defending the food supply from intentional attacks and natural hazards.

It's not an easy task, and there is a lot of work that we must complete, but we all understand what is at stake. I am reminded that, 100 years ago, Upton Sinclair's investigation into the Chicago meatpacking plants led to the formation of the Food and Drug Administration in the United States. That investigation is still relevant today and demonstrates the need for transparency in ensuring the safety of these systems.

In fact, in 2004 the President issued Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9 (HSPD-9) to help achieve this goal. HSPD-9 establishes a national policy to defend the agriculture and food system against terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies. In March 2005, GAO identified confusion over the Department of Homeland Security's role in agroterrorism. The GAO voiced concern that the agency hadn't yet evolved into its leading role under Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9 (HSPD-9). Though two years have passed, significant problems remain.

As the DHS Office of the Inspector General reported in a February 2007 review of homeland security food defense activities, "the enormity of the food sector and the complexity of government oversight pose substantial challenges to food defense and critical infrastructure protection." The complexity of both systems has resulted in the recent publication of several reports critical of the bureaucracies associated with these efforts.

In February of 2007, GAO designated the federal oversight of food safety as a high-risk area for the first time. GAO found that a fragmented system – whereby 15 agencies collectively administer at least 30 laws related to food safety – causes inconsistent oversight, ineffective coordination, and inefficient use of resources. This report found several management problems that reduce the effectiveness of the agencies' routine efforts to protect against agroterrorism. For example, GAO noted that weaknesses in the flow of critical information existed among key stakeholders. Also in February, the Department of Homeland Security's Inspector General issued a report that found that DHS, USDA, and HHS were failing to meet their obligations under HSPD-9 to prepare an integrated food defense plan.

The Inspector General recommended that DHS pursue recruitment hiring, and retention of staff with expertise in matters of post harvest food defense; work collaboratively with USDA and HHS on grants and other funding mechanisms to carry out food defense missions; and identify a single senior DHS official to be accountable for coordinated implementation of all DHS food sector responsibilities, and provide this official with clear authorities and adequate staffing to perform this function.

I hope that the officials before us today can discuss their efforts to improve some of the issues that have been raised. The integrity of our nation's food supply is critical to our national, economic and health security. There is much work to be done to fully secure our food supply chain, and we must act swiftly to shore up the remaining vulnerabilities.